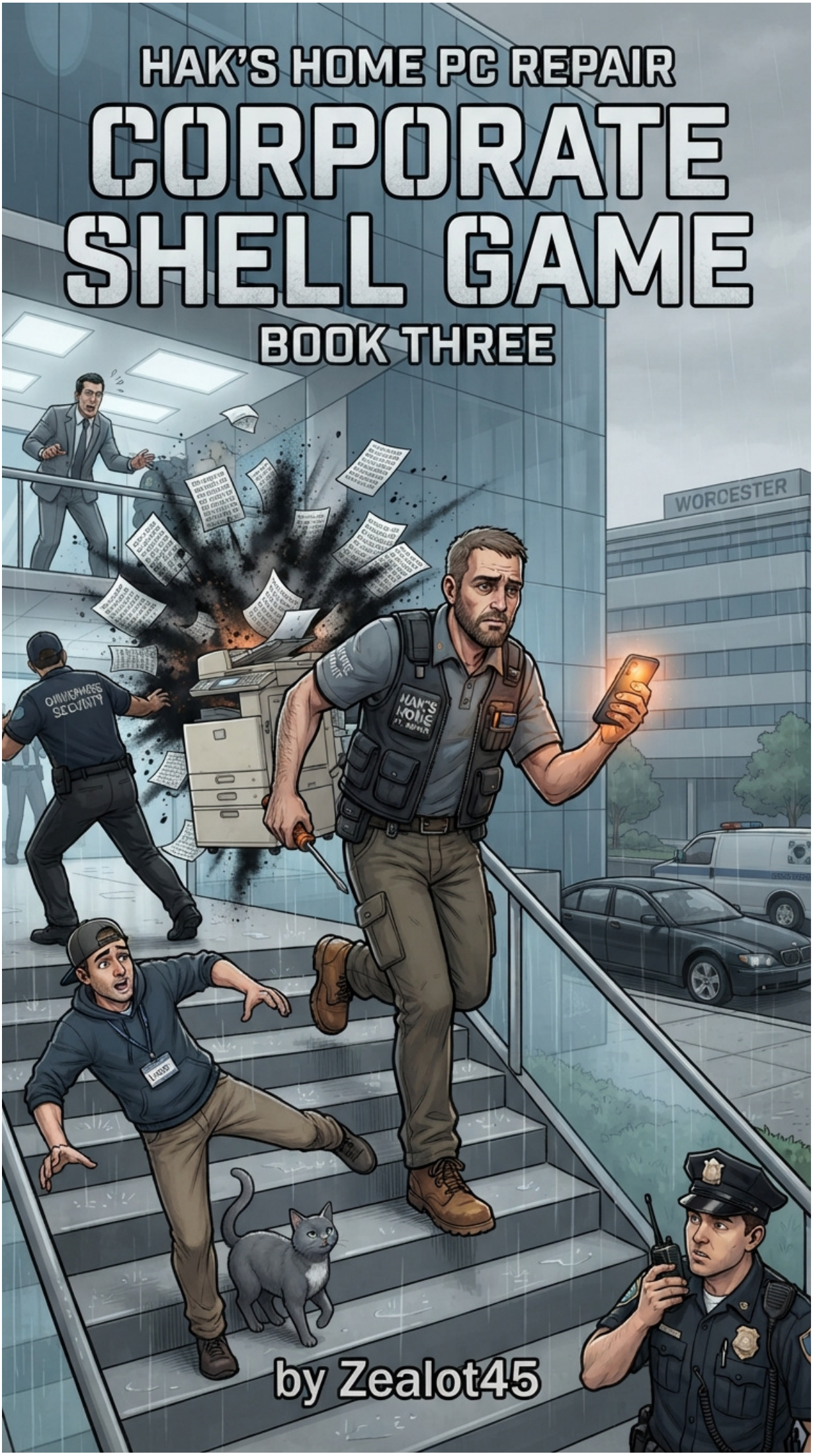
HAK'S HOME PC REPAIR
CORPORATE SHELL GAME
BOOK THREE
WORCESTER
by Zealot45

HAK-ATTACK PRESS

HAK'S HOME PC REPAIR

Book Three: Corporate Shell Game

by Zealot45

A Hak's Home PC Repair Novella

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Hak-Attack Press

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CHAPTER 1

The Chromebook Hinge Job

The call came in at 8:52 in the morning, which should have been my first warning. Nothing good happens before nine. Nothing good happens before noon, honestly, but nine is where the day starts lying to you about its intentions.

"Hinge's busted," the woman said. "Chromebook won't stay open past forty-five degrees."

I told her forty-five degrees was basically a laptop's way of asking for a nap, and I could be there in twenty minutes. She said fine, hung up, and I sat in my van outside a triple-decker on Vernon Hill for a second longer than I needed to, because the sky over Worcester had that flat gray look it gets when it's deciding whether to rain on you out of spite or just general policy.

The job itself took eleven minutes. Two stripped screws, one replacement hinge I had sitting in the toolbox since March, and a customer who insisted on narrating the entire repair like I was a nature documentary. "And now he's got the little screwdriver out. Fascinating."

I've fixed maybe four thousand of these hinges in my life. I could do it blindfolded, underwater, during a power outage, while Donnelly asked me irrelevant questions about my whereabouts. It's not glamorous work. It's not supposed to be. That's the whole point of it — nobody tries to recruit you for a corporate espionage plot because you re-seated a hinge.

I should've known better. I always know better. I never act on it.

Walking back to the van, screwdriver still in hand, I muttered the only sensible thing a person can say at that point in a day that's already decided to go sideways.

"I'm not even supposed to be here today."

The van door stuck a little, same as always. I got in, cranked the heat against a chill that had no business being there in early September, and pulled out onto the street. I had two more calls that afternoon — a printer that "makes a screaming

noise" and a laptop that "just stopped," which is customer-speak for absolutely anything — and I figured that was the whole shape of my day.

I was wrong. The day had other plans. The day, it turned out, worked for OmniSphere Technologies.

CHAPTER 2

The Corporate Recruiter

He was waiting by my van when I got back to it after the second call, which meant either he'd been following me since Vernon Hill or he had a very good guess about my route. Neither option thrilled me.

Gray suit, no tie, the kind of haircut that costs more than my rent. He had a coffee in each hand — one for him, one held out toward me like a peace offering or a bribe, hard to say which with corporate types, they tend to be the same thing wearing different jackets.

"Hak, right? I've heard good things."

"You've heard things," I said. "Good's doing a lot of work in that sentence."

His name was Marcus Feld, Director of Something at OmniSphere Technologies, and he wanted to "pick my brain" over coffee about "a small consulting opportunity." I've done enough of these dances to know the steps. Compliment first. Vague job description second. Number that sounds good until you find out what it's actually for, third.

"We've got some infrastructure concerns," he said. "Nothing dramatic. We just need someone who actually understands the hardware layer, not another consultant with a PowerPoint and a haircut."

I looked at his haircut. He either didn't notice or didn't care.

"I fix printers," I said. "I don't fix corporations."

"Same skill set. Bigger printer."

That got a laugh out of me, which I resented, because it meant he'd done his homework on how to talk to me. Guys like Feld don't improvise. Somewhere in a building with too much glass, somebody had a folder on me, and Feld had read it on the drive over.

He named a number for a single afternoon's work that made my eyebrow do something it doesn't usually do. I told him I'd think about it. He told me to think

fast, because "these things move," which is corporate for we already decided and we're just letting you feel involved.

I drove to my next call — the screaming printer, which turned out to be a jammed feed roller, nothing screaming about it once you popped the cover — and I thought about Feld's coffee the whole way. Not the coffee itself. The fact that he'd known exactly how I take it.

Somebody had done more than a folder. Somebody had done a background check with a highlighter.

I called the number on the card that night. I want it on record that I hesitated first. About four seconds. Not my finest moment, but it's the moment that's true.

CHAPTER 3

Arrival at OmniSphere HQ

OmniSphere Technologies occupied six floors of a glass building off Route 9 that hadn't existed five years ago and now looked like it had always been there, the way new money likes to pretend it's old money. The lobby had a waterfall wall. An actual waterfall, indoors, running down a slab of black stone with the company logo etched into it, backlit blue.

I stood there in my work boots and my Hak's Home PC Repair polo, holding a toolbag that had seen more basements than boardrooms, and I had one clear thought.

This place smells like bad decisions.

Not literally. It smelled like eucalyptus, actually, some diffuser situation pumping out of a vent somewhere, the kind of smell that costs money specifically to smell like nothing's wrong. But the eucalyptus was doing a lot of overtime, and when a building tries that hard to smell like nothing's wrong, something is usually wrong.

A woman met me at the security desk — Priya Shah, IT Director, badge clipped to a blazer, the tired eyes of someone who'd been fighting this building's network for longer than she wanted to admit. She shook my hand like she meant it, which already put her three steps ahead of Feld.

"Thanks for coming out," she said. "I know this is a weird ask for a home repair guy."

"Everybody keeps saying that like it's an insult. I like weird asks. Weird asks pay better."

She walked me through badge security — real badge security, mantrap doors, the kind of setup that made me itch a little with old muscle memory — and up to the fourth floor, where the actual problem lived. Nothing dramatic on paper. Print server kept dropping jobs, a couple of workstations running slow, general network sluggishness that IT had been chasing for two weeks without catching.

"Corporate networks aren't my usual beat," I told her, setting my bag down at an empty desk. "But slow is slow. Let's see what's actually happening under the hood."

She left me with a guest login and a promise to check back in an hour. I plugged in, pulled up the network monitor, and started doing the boring, patient work that nobody ever puts in a movie — watching traffic, checking process loads, the electronic equivalent of listening to an engine idle until you hear the thing that isn't supposed to be there.

Twenty minutes in, I heard it. A rhythm in the traffic that had no business being rhythmic. Something on this network was talking to itself on a schedule, and corporate networks don't usually talk to themselves unless somebody told them to.

I didn't say anything to Priya when she came back. Not yet. You don't yell "fire" in a building until you know where the exits are.

CHAPTER 4

Printer Malfunction #1

The rhythm I'd caught in the traffic led me, eventually, to the fourth floor's print server, which is the least dramatic sentence I will write in this whole account and also completely true. Corporate espionage, when it finally shows up, rarely announces itself with a laser and a countdown. Usually it announces itself with a printer.

This one was in the corner near the break room, a beige workhorse with a paper tray that never quite closed right, the kind of machine every office has and nobody loves. I was standing next to it, half-listening to Priya explain the ticket history, when it woke up on its own and started printing.

Nobody had sent a job.

The pages came out one after another, and they weren't spreadsheets or memos. They were rows of characters — hex blocks, mostly, with the occasional readable fragment poking through like a fish coming up for air before diving back down. Not gibberish. Encrypted gibberish, which is a very different animal, and one I know the shape of.

Priya's face did the thing faces do when they realize the weird ticket they filed three weeks ago just got a lot weirder. "It does this sometimes," she said. "We figured it was a driver bug."

"It's not a driver bug." I pulled a sheet out of the tray while it kept churning behind me. "Drivers don't encrypt. This thing's being used as a dead drop."

I've seen old-school exfiltration before, back when I did this kind of work for a living instead of fixing hinges — using a device nobody watches as a place to stash data in plain sight, because nobody audits a printer log. It's not flashy. It's not supposed to be. Flashy gets caught. Boring survives.

The printer kept whirring behind me, feeding another sheet, patient as a machine that has nowhere else to be.

"Printers don't fail," I said, mostly to myself, mostly because Priya needed something to hold onto that wasn't panic. "Printers plot."

She didn't laugh. I didn't blame her. I wasn't really joking.

I gathered the pages — six of them, dense with encrypted blocks — folded them into my bag, and told Priya I needed access to the print server logs going back a month. She said she'd get me clearance by end of day. I said end of day wasn't fast enough, not for this, and something in my voice must have carried, because she didn't argue.

I fix printers for a living. I know what a broken printer sounds like. This wasn't broken. This was working exactly as somebody intended, and that somebody wasn't on the IT ticket.

CHAPTER 5

Suspicious Files

Priya got me the print server logs faster than promised, which told me she was more rattled than she let on. I spent the next hour tracing the encrypted print jobs back to their source, the way you'd follow a dripping faucet back through the walls to find the actual leak — not glamorous, just methodical, one pipe at a time.

The trail led to a shared drive. Specifically, to a folder three levels deep in a directory structure nobody had bothered to name properly, sitting quiet among a hundred boring folders full of quarterly reports and onboarding PDFs.

The folder was labeled DO NOT AUDIT.

I want to be clear about something, for the record, in case anyone's keeping score on my life choices. A folder labeled DO NOT AUDIT is not a warning sign. It's an invitation printed in capital letters. Nobody names a folder that unless they're either an idiot or they've never once imagined somebody like me sitting at this desk.

I opened it. Of course I opened it. You'd have opened it too, and if you say you wouldn't, you're lying to both of us.

Inside were a handful of files with names that meant nothing on their own — spreadsheets with dates for filenames, a couple of PDFs, one text file just called notes.txt, which is always, always where the real story lives. I opened that one first.

It wasn't a diary. It was closer to a ledger, timestamps and dollar figures and a shorthand I recognized after a minute of squinting — trade windows lined up against internal announcement dates that hadn't been made public yet. Numbers that moved right before news that would've made them move, over and over, too clean to be luck.

I've fixed enough small businesses' books-adjacent messes to know insider trading when it's staring at me in ten-point Calibri.

I didn't touch anything. Didn't copy, didn't forward, didn't so much as right-click. I've been doing this long enough to know that the moment you interact with evidence, you become part of its story, and I had exactly zero interest in becoming part of this one.

I sat back in the ergonomic chair some HR budget had clearly overspent on, and I said the only honest thing available to me.

"I swear I retired from ops."

The chair didn't answer. Somewhere down the hall, the printer started up again, uninvited, printing something nobody asked it to print.

CHAPTER 6

The Corporate Wallet

The notes.txt file had one more line I hadn't clocked the first time through, buried at the bottom under a string of numbers that didn't look like dates or dollar amounts. It looked like a wallet address. The crypto kind.

I've dealt with wallets before, back in the ops days, back when "follow the money" started meaning "follow the blockchain" and everybody had to learn a whole new vocabulary just to keep doing the same old job. A wallet address doesn't lie about what it is, even when everything around it is built to lie about everything else.

I pulled up a block explorer on my phone — never touch the target machine for anything you don't have to, rule one, older than me — and typed the address in. The balance made me sit up straighter than the chair had managed to on its own.

Six figures. Moving in small, careful increments, timed suspiciously close to those trade windows in the ledger. Somebody at OmniSphere had built themselves a quiet little side account, funded by information that wasn't supposed to leave this building, laundered through a wallet nobody in Accounting would ever think to ask about, because Accounting doesn't know what a wallet address looks like and wouldn't recognize one taped to their monitor.

This is the part where a smarter man closes the laptop, tells Priya it's a driver issue after all, and drives home to a printer with a jammed feed roller and nothing more dramatic than that. I am not always a smarter man. I have, on occasion, been informed of this by multiple people in my life, most of them correctly.

I didn't touch the wallet. I didn't need to touch it to know what I was looking at — a live financial crime, sitting encrypted in a print queue and a folder nobody was supposed to open, in a building that smelled like eucalyptus specifically so nobody would ask why it smelled like something else underneath.

I closed the folder. Closed the laptop. Sat there a second in the quiet hum of a floor full of cubicles that had no idea what was sitting three clicks deep on their shared drive.

"I swear I retired from ops," I said again, because apparently once wasn't going to cut it.

I hadn't retired from ops. I'd just stopped getting paid for it. Today, evidently, that was changing, whether I'd agreed to it or not.

CHAPTER 7

The Knock at the Glass Door

I was three minutes into drafting a very careful email to Priya — the kind you write four times before sending, the kind where every word gets weighed because you know it's going to end up in somebody's file eventually — when the conference room door opened without a knock.

Two guys in matching polos, OMNISPHERE SECURITY stitched over the left pocket, the kind of build that comes from a gym membership specifically chosen to look intimidating in a badge photo. The taller one had his hand resting near a radio clipped to his belt like it was a sidearm in a movie he was starring in alone.

"Sir, we need you to step away from the workstation."

I did, hands where they could see them, because I've learned the hard way that being right about your innocence doesn't matter half as much as being calm about it. Calm reads as harmless. Right reads as suspicious if you argue too hard.

"We got a flag," the shorter one said. "Unusual access patterns. Foreign device on the network poking around files it shouldn't be poking around."

"That foreign device is me," I said, "and Priya Shah gave me guest access an hour ago, and the only thing I've been poking around is why your print server's been having encrypted conversations with itself. Check with her before you check my pulse."

They didn't love that answer, mostly because it was true and true answers rarely de-escalate anything with a badge attached to it. The taller one radioed it in anyway, and while we waited, I looked at the two of them — earnest, doing exactly the job they'd been trained to do, absolutely no idea that the thing actually worth flagging was sitting in a folder three floors up labeled with the corporate equivalent of a neon sign.

"I'm fixing your printer," I told them, mostly to fill the silence, mostly because somebody needed to say it out loud in this building. "Not your felony."

Priya showed up four minutes later, out of breath, badge swinging, and vouched for me hard enough that the two guards backed off with the particular sheepishness of men who'd rather have been right than polite. She apologized twice on the elevator ride back up. I told her not to bother — a flagged account doing exactly what mine had been doing was the system working as designed. It just happened to be pointed at the wrong target today.

Wrong target from Security's angle. Exactly right target from mine.

I didn't tell her that part yet. I needed to know a little more before I handed her a story big enough to end a career — possibly several, possibly including hers, if the wrong person had been signing her checks all along.

CHAPTER 8

ZeroDay Dan Appears (Uninvited)

I was back at the guest desk, trying to look like a man who hadn't just been nearly detained by mall-cop energy in a six-figure blazer, when a very familiar and very unwelcome voice carried across the fourth floor like it had never once considered an indoor volume.

"Yo, Hak! Heard this place has an unlimited snack wall!"

Dan. Full name Daniel Okafor, self-appointed handle ZeroDay Dan, occasionally AcidBurn depending on which movie he'd rewatched most recently. He had a lanyard around his neck that said VISITOR in letters big enough to read from the parking lot, and I have never in my life figured out how he acquires these lanyards. He shouldn't have one. He should not be able to walk into a corporate building with badge-controlled mantrap doors. And yet.

"How," I said, "are you here."

"Priya's cousin's roommate does IT here, mentioned they had a whole snack wall situation, kombucha on tap, the works. Figured I'd swing by."

"That is not a security clearance, Dan. That's a rumor about snacks."

He wasn't listening, because he never listens during the setup, only during the part where I explain why whatever he's about to do is a terrible idea, and sometimes not even then. He'd already clocked the security guards from Chapter Seven loitering near the elevator, still smarting from getting overruled, and he lit up like they were old friends.

"Bring the pH down, AcidBurn," I said, low enough that only he'd catch it, because the last thing this building needed was Dan's enthusiasm hitting anything flammable, and everything in this building was flammable to Dan.

"I'm just vibing, Hak."

"You're vibing in a building mid-federal-crime. Sit. Down. Preferably somewhere with no keyboards near it."

He sat, mostly, in the sense that his body occupied a chair while the rest of him remained in a state of low-grade orbital motion. I gave him the short version — encrypted printer, DO NOT AUDIT folder, a wallet with more money in it than either of us would see combined in a decade — because if I didn't tell him something, he'd invent something worse, louder, and probably involving the word "Gibson."

His eyes went wide in the specific way they go wide right before he says something that requires immediate correction.

"Dude. We could totally—"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was gonna—"

"You're barely hacking your own Wi-Fi, Dan. Whatever the sentence was going to end with, the answer's still no."

He deflated a little, which never lasts, and asked instead whether the snack wall rumor had at least been true. It had. Kombucha on tap and everything. I let him get one can before Priya came back and I had to explain, in real time, why my "consulting associate" had appeared out of nowhere with a visitor badge nobody remembered issuing.

I still don't have an answer for that. I don't think Dan does either. I think the universe just occasionally decides Dan should be somewhere, and paperwork sorts itself out around him after the fact.

CHAPTER 9

The Corporate Threat Tracks the Signal

Priya let Dan stay, mostly because arguing with his existence takes more energy than anyone has by four in the afternoon, and I went back to the print server logs with him hovering close enough to read over my shoulder and far enough that I could still pretend he wasn't.

That's when I noticed the second thing. The first thing had been the printer talking to itself. The second thing was somebody else on the network, watching the printer talk to itself, from outside the building.

Not IT. Not Security. An external IP, cycling through proxies fast enough that whoever was behind it knew exactly what they were doing, probing the same print server queue I'd flagged an hour earlier, gentle enough not to trip the alarms Security actually watched, precise enough that it clearly wasn't the first network they'd ever cased.

"That's not a script kiddie," I said, mostly to myself. Dan took it as an invitation anyway.

"Could be a script kiddie with a good VPN—"

"It's not a script kiddie, Dan. It's somebody who knows exactly what that folder is, and exactly how much money is sitting in that wallet, and they're checking whether anyone else has noticed it yet."

The traffic pattern had a rhythm to it, same as the printer had — patient, spaced out, the digital equivalent of someone circling a block slowly enough that nobody calls it in as suspicious. I've built that rhythm myself, back when I got paid for it. Recognizing it in somebody else's hands felt like hearing your own voice on somebody else's recording.

Whoever they were, they weren't OmniSphere's internal security team. They were external, professional, and interested in the exact same folder I'd found by accident that morning, which meant one of two things. Either they were hunting the same insider I was — or they were working for him.

I closed the laptop lid halfway, enough to stop the glow without looking dramatic about it, and looked at Dan, who for once had gone quiet in a way that actually helped.

"Somebody besides us knows about the wallet," I said. "And they've got better opsec than you."

"Everybody's got better opsec than me."

"Today that's not comforting, Dan. Today that's a threat model."

Outside the window, the parking lot had gone gold with late afternoon light, ordinary and quiet, cars nobody was thinking twice about. I thought twice about all of them anyway. Old habits don't retire just because you told people they did.

CHAPTER 10

Hak's Van Gets Tagged

I left OmniSphere a little after six, toolbag heavier with printouts than tools for once, Dan trailing behind me still trying to negotiate his way into "just one more kombucha for the road." Priya walked us both out through the lobby, past the waterfall wall, and told me she'd call once she'd figured out who to trust with what I'd found. I told her to be careful about that list. In my experience it's shorter than people think.

The van was where I'd left it, third row of the lot, nothing obviously wrong with it — no broken glass, no slashed tires, nothing a normal person would clock walking past. I almost didn't clock it either. It was Dan, of all people, who spotted it, crouched by the rear bumper making a noise like he'd found a rare Pokémon.

"Dude. Dude. There's a thing on your van."

It was small, magnetic, tucked up under the wheel well where a normal inspection would never find it unless you were already looking. GPS beacon, off-the-shelf but not the cheap kind, battery good for weeks. Somebody had gotten close enough to my van, in a parking lot with security cameras and badge-controlled doors thirty feet away, to plant a tracker without anybody noticing.

That's not amateur hour. That's a team with resources, patience, and zero concern about a home repair guy's van being beneath their attention — which told me they'd already decided I was a problem worth solving.

I pried it off with a flathead, turned it over in my hand, and felt the particular cold feeling you get when a job you didn't sign up for decides you're already in it up to your neck, whether you agreed to the depth or not.

"Should we, like, throw it in a river or something?" Dan asked, already reaching for it like this was the part of the movie he'd been training for his whole life.

"We're keeping it," I said, pocketing it instead. "It tells us as much about them as it tells them about us. Maybe more."

I stood there another second in the gold light gone gray now, looking at a parking lot that had seemed ordinary twenty minutes ago and now felt like it had eyes in it. Whoever had planted that beacon knew my van, knew my schedule well enough to catch it unguarded, and knew — or was about to find out — exactly how tired I already was of this day.

"I'm too old for this," I said, and got in the van, and drove home checking my mirrors the entire way, which is a habit you never fully lose once you've had a reason to build it.

CHAPTER 11

Mags' Corporate Paranoia

Mags called before I'd even gotten my boots off, which should tell you something about the timing of that woman's radar. She doesn't need evidence to know something's wrong. She operates on a kind of ambient dread that turns out to be right often enough that I've stopped arguing with it.

"They're watching Beanie," she said, no hello, straight into it. "The van across the street's been there since Tuesday."

Beanie is the cat. I want that on the record early, because Beanie's involvement in this story only escalates from here, and I need you to already understand that Beanie is, in fact, just a cat, gray and unbothered and profoundly uninterested in international finance.

"Mags, nobody's watching Beanie."

"Then why's the van still there?"

I didn't have a good answer for that one, mostly because after the day I'd had — a printer with secrets, a wallet full of dirty money, a tracker pried off my own van an hour earlier — the idea of a suspicious van parked near Mags's house didn't sound as ridiculous as it would have that morning. I told her I'd swing by and check it out, mostly to get her off the phone before she talked herself into calling Donnelly directly, which historically makes everything worse and takes twice as long to unmake.

The van, when I drove past twenty minutes later, turned out to belong to a cable installer three doors down, doing a legitimate, boring, extremely non-corporate-espionage installation for the Petrocellis. I told Mags this. She was unconvinced.

"They could be posing as cable guys. That's, like, chapter one of the spy handbook."

"Mags, I read the actual notes.txt file today. There's a real wallet, real money, a real folder labeled DO NOT AUDIT. I don't need you inventing a cable-guy

conspiracy on top of an actual conspiracy. I've only got bandwidth for one at a time."

That, at least, got her attention off the van and onto me, which was somehow worse, because now she wanted the whole story, and Mags's version of "the whole story" means asking follow-up questions until three in the morning while feeding Beanie treats he absolutely does not need.

"Nobody is spying on your cat," I told her, for what would not be the last time this week. "Except maybe the cat."

Beanie, from his position on the windowsill, gave no indication either way. He rarely does. That's part of what makes him so hard to rule out.

CHAPTER 12

Dan's Terrible Corporate Plan

Dan showed up at my place the next morning uninvited, which is his natural resting state, holding a legal pad covered in handwriting that got progressively more excited toward the bottom of the page, the way his handwriting always does when he's had an idea he considers brilliant.

"Okay, so, hear me out."

Four words that have never once preceded a good idea in the entire time I've known him. I poured coffee anyway, because sitting through Dan's terrible plans goes better with caffeine, same as most disasters.

"We social-engineer the CEO."

I let that sit in the air for a second, the way you let a bad smell announce itself fully before you address it. "You want to social-engineer the CEO of a company with badge-controlled mantrap doors, an internal security team that already flagged me once, and a possible hired external team professional enough to plant a GPS tracker on my van without tripping a single camera."

"When you say it like that it sounds bad."

"It sounds bad because it is bad, Dan. There's no other way to say it that makes it not bad."

His plan, in its full and terrible glory, involved a fake OmniSphere polo purchased from some novelty print shop, a clipboard, and what he described as "aggressive confidence," which is Dan's answer to approximately every problem he's ever encountered, technical or otherwise. He was going to walk into the executive floor, claim to be doing an IT satisfaction survey, and somehow parlay that into a face-to-face with the CEO about "irregularities."

"Dan, you're not a threat actor. You're a threat inconvenience."

"That's kind of harsh."

"You memorized three Kali commands and now you think you're ready to run a pretext against a Fortune-adjacent company's CEO. You're barely social-engineering your own Wi-Fi. I watched you forget your own router password last month."

"That was one time."

"It was Tuesday and also Thursday."

He crossed his arms, wounded, the way he gets when I point out a true thing he'd rather not have pointed at. But under the wounded look there was something else — a flicker of the actual problem, which is that Dan genuinely wanted to help, in the loud, chaotic, occasionally-catastrophic way he always wants to help, because somewhere under the enthusiasm cloud there's a kid who just wants to be useful and hasn't figured out yet that competence usually looks quieter than he does.

I told him no. Firmly. Repeatedly. I told him the plan currently in motion involved patience, documentation, and figuring out who at OmniSphere could actually be trusted before anybody walked into an executive suite waving a clipboard at a man who might, for all we knew yet, be the exact person running the wallet.

Dan agreed, verbally, which with Dan carries roughly the legal weight of a note passed in study hall. I should have known that wasn't the end of it. I always know. I never act on it fast enough.

CHAPTER 13

Hak Tries to Fix the Mess

Priya got me remote access that afternoon, cautious and limited, the kind of access you grant someone when you believe them but haven't yet decided how much you're willing to risk on that belief. It was enough. I set up at my kitchen table with two monitors, the encrypted printouts spread out next to a mug of coffee gone cold an hour ago, and started working the wallet the careful way.

Decrypting something you're not supposed to have wasn't the point. Understanding it without touching it was. I built a sandboxed environment, isolated, no network path back to anything real, and started mapping the transaction pattern against the trade dates in the ledger — the slow, patient work of turning suspicion into something that would hold up if it ever needed to.

I was maybe forty minutes in, finally getting a shape I could work with, when Beanie walked across my keyboard.

I don't know how he got in. I don't know how he always gets in. Mags swears she didn't bring him by, and I believe her, mostly because the alternative — that Beanie let himself in, made his way across town, and located my specific keyboard with intent — is somehow not the craziest theory I've entertained this week.

He sat directly on the spacebar for a solid ten seconds, tail doing that slow judgmental sweep, before standing, stretching, and walking off toward my couch like he'd accomplished exactly what he'd come to do.

The sandbox had crashed. Not catastrophically — nothing was lost, I'd been saving incrementally, old habit, one of the few that's never once failed me — but I'd have to rebuild the mapping from the last checkpoint, another twenty minutes gone to a cat with zero stake in international financial crime.

"I swear that cat outranks me," I said, to no one, because Beanie had already relocated to the couch and was in no mood for accountability.

I rebuilt the mapping. Slower this time, methodical, one eye on the cat the whole way through, because if there's one lesson this week had already taught me, it was

that nothing in this case was going to move in a straight line — not the wallet, not the tracker, not Dan's terrible plans, and apparently not the cat, who seemed determined to insert himself into the investigation whether anyone had extended an invitation or not.

By the time I finished, it was past midnight, the coffee was long gone, and I had a transaction map clean enough to hand to somebody who mattered. I just didn't know yet who that somebody was going to turn out to be.

CHAPTER 14

The Cat Saves the Day (Again)

It turned out Beanie hadn't just crashed my sandbox out of spite, or judgment, or whatever motivates a cat to do anything. Going back through the crash logs the next morning, bleary and on my third coffee, I found that his ten seconds on the spacebar had triggered a keyboard shortcut I'd forgotten I'd mapped months ago, one that force-opened a hidden config file I'd been trying to locate manually for the better part of an hour the night before.

The file had been sitting inside the sandboxed copy of the DO NOT AUDIT folder the whole time, buried under a filename that looked like system junk, the kind of thing you'd scroll past a hundred times without a second look. It was a config file for a scheduled task — one that pushed a copy of the wallet's transaction history to a secondary address every time a trade window closed.

A backup. Somebody at OmniSphere had built themselves a backup of their own crime, presumably in case the first wallet ever got flagged, frozen, or clawed back. Which meant there were two wallets now, not one, and the second one had a transaction history stretching back further than anything in the original ledger — eighteen months, not six.

Eighteen months of insider trades. That's not a mistake somebody made once under pressure. That's a system somebody built on purpose and ran on a schedule, patient and quiet, the exact same rhythm I'd recognized in the printer traffic two days earlier.

I sat back and looked at the couch, where Beanie was doing his morning ritual of ignoring everyone with tremendous focus.

"I swear that cat outranks me," I said again, because it kept being true and I couldn't think of a better sentence.

I didn't know yet whether to be grateful or unsettled that the single biggest break in this case had come from a cat sitting on a keyboard rather than anything I'd done on purpose. I decided, on balance, to go with grateful. You take your wins

where the universe hands them, even when the universe hands them to you via cat.

Mags, when I told her about it later, took it as immediate and total vindication.

"See? I told you they were watching Beanie."

"Mags, nobody was watching Beanie. Beanie was watching them. There's a difference, and it's an important one."

She didn't seem to think there was. I let her have it. Some victories aren't worth arguing away from the people who need them most.

CHAPTER 15

Donnelly's Corporate Investigation

Donnelly caught up with me at OmniSphere itself, which meant somebody in that building had called Worcester PD, which meant this had officially stopped being a quiet, careful thing and started being a thing with a paper trail I didn't control. He was standing by the waterfall wall when I came down from the fourth floor, badge out, notebook already flipped open like he'd been rehearsing the flip in the elevator mirror.

"Got a call about unauthorized access on the network. Funny thing — your name's all over the visitor log."

"That's because I'm a consultant, Donnelly. Consultants access the network. That's the job."

"Consultant." He said it the way he says most words he doesn't fully trust, like he was testing whether it would bite him. "Funny kind of consultant who finds encrypted printer jobs and crypto wallets in the same week he shows up."

I'll give Donnelly this much — he's not stupid. He's just aimed wrong, almost constitutionally, like a compass that works fine except it's been calibrated to point at whoever's standing closest instead of north. He had the instinct that something criminal was happening in this building. He just hadn't yet connected it to anyone who actually deserved the attention.

"You can't arrest a router, Donnelly," I told him, which wasn't strictly about the moment but felt worth saying on principle, given his track record.

"I'm not arresting a router. I'm asking you some questions."

I answered them. All of them, patiently, the printer, the folder, the wallet, the tracker on my van, careful to leave out exactly nothing and exactly nothing extra either — no theories about who at OmniSphere might be behind it, because theories aren't evidence, and handing Donnelly a theory is like handing a toddler a lit sparkler. He might do something with it. It probably won't be the thing you wanted.

He wrote it all down, mostly accurately, occasionally spelling "encrypted" in a way that made me wince internally. When he finished, he looked at me with the particular squint he gets when he's decided something and wants me to know it, even if the something is wrong.

"I think you're in over your head here."

"Donnelly, I have been in over my head since eight fifty-two yesterday morning. That ship's not just sailed. It's in dry dock in another state."

He didn't laugh. Donnelly rarely does, at my jokes least of all. He closed his notebook, told me not to leave town, which felt dramatic for a guy who drives three miles to work every day, and headed off toward the elevator to go ask Priya the same questions in a tone that would make her nervous for no good reason.

I let him go. Some fights aren't worth having in a lobby with a waterfall wall listening in.

CHAPTER 16

The Rival Contractor Moves In

The van across from Mags's house turned out to be exactly what I'd told her it was — a cable guy, nothing more. The van outside my own apartment two nights later was a different story entirely, and this time I didn't need Dan crouched by a bumper to clock it.

It sat half a block down, engine off, two silhouettes inside that didn't move the way people move when they're actually waiting for someone. They moved the way people move when they're watching someone, which is a stiller, more patient kind of nothing, the kind you learn to notice once you've spent enough of your life on either side of that particular equation.

I didn't confront them. You don't confront professionals in a parked van at eleven at night just to prove a point to yourself. You note the plate, the model, the general shape of the operation, and you go back inside and you think.

They matched the profile of whoever had been probing the print server two days earlier — same patient rhythm, same unwillingness to trip an alarm they didn't need to trip. My working theory had solidified into something close to certainty: somebody inside OmniSphere had hired outside muscle, a private security or "risk consulting" outfit, professional enough to plant a tracker in a badge-controlled lot and sit outside a repair guy's apartment without breaking a single traffic law while doing it.

I pulled up what little I could find on private security firms operating in the corporate-espionage-adjacent space around Worcester and Boston, and one name kept surfacing in ways that felt less like coincidence and more like pattern — BlackRiver Risk Solutions, a firm with a website full of stock photos of confident people in blazers and absolutely no useful information about who actually ran it.

"This is why I hate IoT," I muttered, staring at the van's silhouette through my blinds, even though the van itself had nothing to do with the Internet of Things. It

just felt true in the moment, the general sense that everything around me had started quietly reporting on itself to somebody else.

I called Priya that night, later than was polite, and told her, carefully, that I thought whoever was behind the wallet had brought in professional help to make sure nobody looked at it too closely. I didn't say Vance Callahan's name yet. I didn't have enough to say it out loud. But I had a feeling, the old kind, the kind that used to come with a paycheck attached, and the feeling had a name on the tip of it already.

CHAPTER 17

Hak's Counter-Hack

If somebody was going to sit outside my apartment in a van, patient and professional, then I figured the least I could do was make their job slightly less pleasant while I finished mine. That meant getting back into OmniSphere's network on my own terms, quietly, without waiting for another round of cautious, limited access from Priya, who had enough to worry about without me adding "how did Hak get back in" to the pile.

I didn't need to hack anything, not really. I needed to remember things.

Back in the nineties, before firewalls got smart and networks got paranoid, there was a whole toolkit built around the idea that most systems trust the wrong things by default — trust a phone line because it's a phone line, trust a signal because it arrived through the expected door. Phreaking wasn't magic. It was exploiting the gap between what a system was designed to check and what it actually checked, and that gap, it turns out, never fully closes. It just moves.

OmniSphere's firewall was modern, expensive, and confident. It also had a maintenance port left open for a vendor's remote diagnostics tool, the kind of thing IT forgets exists eleven months out of twelve, because it only matters the one month a technician needs it. I found it the old way — patient scanning, listening for the tone instead of the flashing light, the digital equivalent of tapping a wall until you find the stud.

Dan, watching over my shoulder because he'd shown up again uninvited and this time I hadn't had the energy to send him home, went quiet in a way I'd never seen from him before. Actually quiet. Impressed quiet.

"Dude. How did you even—"

"Relax, Neo. This is 1998 stuff."

"That's insane. That's actually insane, Hak, you just—"

"It's not insane. It's old. There's a difference, and once you've been doing this long enough, you learn the old stuff never really stops working, because most people building the new stuff never bothered to ask why the old stuff worked in the first place."

I was in far enough to see what I needed — not to touch anything, not to move money, just to confirm what I already suspected, a login pattern on the wallet's scheduled backup task that traced back to a specific executive credential, timestamped, consistent, boring in exactly the way real evidence usually is.

Vance Callahan. Director of Strategic Partnerships, whatever that meant, and apparently also director of a very strategic partnership with his own personal crypto wallet.

I logged out clean, no trace, the way you're supposed to. Dan was still staring at me like I'd just performed a magic trick instead of a mildly clever workaround.

"Teach me that."

"No."

"Come on—"

"Dan, you locked yourself out of your own laptop twice this month. We are not doing this today."

CHAPTER 18

Dan Double-Crosses Everyone

I should have known better than to say Callahan's name out loud in front of Dan, even quietly, even just once, because Dan's brain does a very specific thing with information like that — it doesn't store it, it detonates it, usually at the worst possible moment and always with the best possible intentions.

I found out the hard way two days later, when Dan called me from OmniSphere's parking lot, breathless, whispering in a way that somehow carried louder than his normal talking voice.

"Okay so don't be mad—"

"I'm already mad, Dan. Start from the beginning."

The beginning, it turned out, involved Dan deciding that if I wasn't going to let him "help" through legitimate channels, he'd help through illegitimate ones — specifically, by attempting to access Callahan's office directly, under the theory that if he could just get physical access to Callahan's laptop for "like, ninety seconds," he could pull the wallet credentials himself and hand me the whole case gift-wrapped.

"You tried to break into an executive's office."

"I tried to help!"

"You tried to steal evidence from a man we suspect is being protected by a professional security firm that's already tracked my van and parked outside my apartment, Dan. What part of any of that sounded like a ninety-second job to you?"

He didn't have an answer for that, mostly because there wasn't one, and to his credit — the very small, very hard-won credit I'll extend him here — he at least had the decency to sound embarrassed about it once I laid it out plainly. The plan had gone about as well as every other plan Dan's ever executed without adult supervision. He'd gotten as far as the executive floor, badge still somehow working

through whatever loophole Dan permanently exists inside of, and had made it three steps into Callahan's outer office before tripping over Beanie.

I want to be very clear that I do not know how Beanie got onto the executive floor of OmniSphere Technologies. I have stopped asking these questions about Beanie. Some things you just accept as load-bearing facts of your life now, the same way you accept gravity or Massachusetts weather.

Dan went down loud, the laptop he'd been reaching for skittered across the floor, and an assistant two cubicles over came running before Dan could do anything but lie there, tangled in his own ambition, apologizing to a cat that offered him absolutely no sympathy in return.

"That wasn't a double-cross," I told him later, once he'd talked his way out of the building with a story about looking for the bathroom that nobody fully believed and nobody could quite disprove either. "That was a double-faceplant."

"I was trying to help."

"I know you were, Dan. That's the scary part."

CHAPTER 19

Printer Malfunction #2

Whatever goodwill Dan's stunt might have burned with Priya got overshadowed almost immediately by a second, much larger printer incident, which I've come to understand is simply how this building operates now — one crisis politely waiting its turn behind another.

I was back on the fourth floor, this time with actual clearance, actual purpose, trying to pin down the exact moment the scheduled backup task had first triggered, when the same beige printer from Chapter Four decided it had had enough of being a metaphor and wanted to become a literal hazard instead.

It started with a smell. Then a rattle. Then, with the specific dramatic timing that only office equipment seems capable of, a toner cartridge somebody had clearly overdue-replaced for months finally gave out entirely, in the loudest, messiest way a toner cartridge can give out, which — for anyone who's never witnessed it — is considerably louder and messier than you'd expect from something the size of a shoebox.

Black powder went everywhere. The break room, three cubicles, a very expensive-looking rug near the elevator bank, and one very unlucky Marketing employee who happened to be walking past at exactly the wrong moment and would spend the rest of the day looking like he'd lost a fight with a chimney.

Security showed up again — the same two guards from Chapter Seven, understandably twitchy at this point about anything happening within thirty feet of me — and in the confusion, with toner still settling like black snow over half the floor, I saw an opportunity I wasn't about to waste.

I grabbed the two guards' attention with the toner cloud, pointed them toward the mess, and used the sixty seconds of pure chaos to slip into the network closet unnoticed and pull a physical log dump straight off the print server itself — the one thing I hadn't been able to get remotely, the one thing that would tie the

encrypted print jobs directly to a specific workstation login instead of just a general pattern.

Vance Callahan's workstation. Confirmed, physically, undeniably, on a piece of hardware nobody could argue had been spoofed or misconfigured.

I walked out of that closet covered in a light dusting of toner myself, log dump safely on a drive in my pocket, and found Dan waiting by the elevator looking like a man who'd just watched his hero achieve something legendary.

"You weaponized the printer explosion."

"I used the chaos that was already happening. There's a difference."

"That's the coolest thing I've ever seen you do."

"Dan, I have literally hacked a corporate firewall in front of you this week."

"Yeah, but this had toner."

CHAPTER 20

The Wallet Transfer Begins

With the log dump confirming Callahan's login tied directly to the print server exfiltration, and the scheduled backup task confirming a second wallet stretching back eighteen months, I had enough. Not courtroom enough — that was Donnelly's department, eventually, whether he deserved it or not — but enough to justify the one move I'd been holding off making since the second day of this whole mess.

Moving the money.

Not stealing it. I want that distinction on the record, permanently, because I know exactly how this sounds and I know exactly how it would sound to somebody like Donnelly if I didn't say it plainly. Callahan's wallets held funds traceable to insider trades — dirty, documented, and sitting exactly where anyone with the same access I'd found could reach them, including, as I'd already seen, a professional security team apparently willing to plant trackers and sit in parked vans to make sure nobody looked too closely.

If BlackRiver's job was protecting that money until Callahan could quietly move or launder it further, then the money sitting still and traceable was the one piece of leverage I actually had. Moving it into a secured, documented wallet — one I could hand over intact, with a full transaction history, to whoever ended up actually investigating this properly — took that leverage away from both of them at once.

It wasn't clean. It wasn't the kind of thing I'd have signed up for a week earlier fixing a Chromebook hinge. But dirty money sitting still is a liability waiting to disappear the moment its owner gets nervous, and Callahan, by every sign I'd seen, was getting nervous fast.

I started the transfer late that night, slow and careful, the kind of move you make in small increments specifically so it doesn't look like a single dramatic withdrawal — the same trick, ironically, Callahan himself had been using to hide

the original trades in the first place. There's a certain grim humor in fighting fire with the exact shape of fire someone else built.

I was maybe a third of the way through when my monitoring picked up a spike in outbound traffic from an unfamiliar node, watching the same wallet, reacting almost in real time.

They'd noticed.

"I'm too old for this," I said again, to an empty kitchen, and kept moving the money anyway, because stopping now would've been worse than finishing, and somewhere out there — closer than I wanted to think about — a van full of professionals had just realized the same thing I had.

This wasn't going to stay quiet much longer.

CHAPTER 21

Standoff in the Conference Room

They came for the wallet directly, which I'd half expected and half hoped wouldn't happen quite this fast. Priya called me at six the next morning, voice tight in a way I hadn't heard from her yet, saying two men who weren't OmniSphere employees had badged into the fourth floor using credentials nobody in IT recognized, and were currently sitting in the same conference room where I'd first drafted that careful email to her four days earlier.

I got there in twenty minutes flat, breaking at least two traffic laws Donnelly would've had opinions about, Dan riding shotgun because he'd been camped outside my apartment "just in case," which for once turned out to be useful instead of alarming.

The conference room had gone very quiet by the time we arrived. Two men in the same generic professional blazers I'd half-glimpsed through a van window nights earlier stood on one side of the table. Priya stood on the other, arms crossed, doing an admirable job of looking calmer than she had any right to feel. Mags was there too, somehow, because Mags has an uncanny ability to arrive exactly where the story needs her, usually with Beanie in a carrier she insists on bringing "for moral support," which is either the most or least useful thing a cat has ever provided in a hostage-adjacent situation.

"Mr. Hak," the taller of the two said, using my name like he'd looked it up rather than earned it. "We represent a client with a strong interest in some data you've recently accessed."

"BlackRiver Risk Solutions," I said, because there wasn't much point pretending we were still being coy about it. "Working for Vance Callahan."

Neither of them confirmed it. Neither of them needed to. Their faces did the confirming for them, the particular stillness of professionals who've just realized the person across the table already has the whole picture assembled.

"We'd like the wallet returned to its original location," the shorter one said. "No further complications necessary."

"The wallet's holding eighteen months of insider trading evidence," I said. "Returning it isn't a de-escalation. It's an accessory charge with my name on it."

Dan, beside me, had gone very still — the good kind of still, for once, sensing correctly that this was not a room that needed his enthusiasm — while Beanie, from inside his carrier, let out a long, unimpressed meow that somehow landed as the most articulate thing anyone in the room had said in the last thirty seconds.

Nobody moved for a long moment. Then, somewhere down the hall, right on cue, I heard Donnelly's voice asking a security guard where the "corporate cult meeting" was being held, and I realized this was about to get a great deal more complicated before it got simple again.

CHAPTER 22

Hak's Improvised Defense

Whatever calm the room had been holding onto broke the moment the taller BlackRiver operative took a step toward the laptop still open on the conference table — my laptop, the one with the wallet transfer sitting half-finished, a screen full of exactly the evidence nobody in this room wanted staying documented.

I didn't have a weapon. I've never carried one, not in this line of work, not even back in the ops days when the work occasionally called for something sharper than a screwdriver. What I had was a conference room full of exactly the kind of ordinary corporate hardware nobody ever thinks to weaponize, because nobody ever needs to, until suddenly they do.

The badge reader by the door ran on the same network segment as the printer down the hall, which meant I could lock it from my laptop with nine keystrokes, sealing the room's second exit before the shorter operative had fully processed what I was doing. The conference room's ceiling-mounted router, the same model I'd installed in probably forty small offices over the years, had a directional antenna array I knew how to overdrive into a screech of interference loud enough to make a room full of professionals wince and lose a half-second of focus, which in a standoff, a half-second is very nearly everything.

And the break room microwave — the same one that had been humming quietly two rooms over the entire time, completely unbothered by any of this — has a magnetron that, run with the door propped just slightly ajar and pointed with enough patience, throws off exactly the kind of electromagnetic noise that scrambles a cheap handheld radio for about four very useful seconds.

I used all three. Not gracefully. Not like a movie. Router screeching, badge reader locked, Dan sprinting to the break room on my shout to "prop the door and point it," which he executed with the single most competent burst of effort I have ever personally witnessed from him.

"This is why you keep old hardware," I said, mostly to Priya, who was staring at me like she'd just discovered her home repair guy had a second job she hadn't been told about, which, to be fair, was more or less accurate.

The BlackRiver operatives weren't stopped, exactly — four seconds of scrambled radio and a screeching router doesn't stop trained professionals, it just costs them the one thing they hadn't planned for, which was time. And in that stolen handful of seconds, boots came pounding down the hallway outside, a voice already talking before it arrived, loud and confident and, as always, aimed at entirely the wrong target.

Donnelly had found the room.

CHAPTER 23

Donnelly Arrives Late (Again)

He came through the door radio still crackling with the last dying static of the microwave trick, notebook already out, badge held up like it was going to explain anything about the scene he'd just walked into — a conference room full of scrambled electronics, a cat carrier, two men in blazers who very clearly did not work here, a laptop mid-transfer, and me standing in the middle of it looking like I'd aged a decade since breakfast.

"Alright, everybody stay where you are. Somebody want to explain the corporate cult meeting?"

"It's not a corporate cult meeting, Donnelly," I said, for what felt like the hundredth time this week I'd had to correct his read on a situation. "It's a firmware rollback."

"That's not a firmware rollback either. I know what firmware means and this ain't it."

He wasn't wrong, exactly, but explaining the actual truth — international insider trading, a professional security firm, a wallet transfer in progress, a cat somehow load-bearing to the whole operation — would've taken longer than the situation had time for, with two BlackRiver operatives still recalculating their options six feet away and Callahan's crime sitting on my laptop screen for anyone with eyes to see.

Priya, to her enormous credit, stepped in with the version of the truth that actually mattered in the moment, calm and clear in a way that cut through Donnelly's confusion faster than anything I could've managed. "Detective, these two men badged in with unauthorized credentials this morning and are attempting to intimidate an outside consultant into surrendering evidence of financial fraud committed by one of our directors."

Donnelly blinked. It took him a second — it usually does — but once the shape of an actual crime landed in front of him clearly enough, he moved fast, faster than

I generally give him credit for, notebook away, radio up, calling it in with the specific brand of confidence that makes Donnelly genuinely good at exactly one part of his job: once he's pointed at the right target, he does not miss.

The two operatives, seeing the math change in real time, did the thing professionals do when a situation stops being winnable — they went quiet, cooperative, the particular calm of men who've clearly had this exact conversation with police before and know exactly how little arguing helps.

"Corporate cult meeting," Donnelly muttered again, mostly to himself, writing something in his notebook that I sincerely hope wasn't going to end up as an official incident description. "I've heard some things this week."

"You have no idea," I told him, and went back to the laptop, because the transfer still had eleven minutes left to finish, and nothing about this morning had given me any confidence it would be allowed to finish quietly.

CHAPTER 24

The Wallet Transfer Completes

Eleven minutes is a long time to sit in a room with two detained security contractors, a Worcester detective radioing for backup, a cat unbothered by any of it, and a wallet transfer that absolutely could not afford to fail this close to the finish line. I sat there watching the progress bar with the specific patience you learn from years of watching worse things than progress bars, and I did not look up much, because looking up meant looking at two men who had clearly not yet given up on the idea that this could still go their way.

The last increment moved at 9:47 that morning. Eighteen months of insider trades, funneled through two wallets and a scheduled backup task somebody had built specifically to survive exactly this kind of scrutiny, now sat instead in a wallet I controlled, timestamped, documented, and about to become somebody else's problem in the very best possible sense of that phrase.

The moment the confirmation hit my screen, I felt something in my shoulders let go that I hadn't realized had been locked up since roughly eight fifty-two the previous Monday.

The taller BlackRiver operative, watching the same screen from six feet away with the flat expression of a man doing math he didn't like, said the only thing either of them had said in the last ten minutes that sounded genuinely rattled instead of professionally composed.

"That's — you can't just—"

"I already did," I said. "Should've moved faster."

Donnelly, radio still crackling with backup en route, looked between the two operatives and the laptop and me with the expression of a man who'd walked into the third act of a movie without seeing the first two and was doing his best to catch up on vibes alone. "So what exactly did you just do?"

"Made sure the money can't disappear before anybody official gets a chance to look at where it came from," I said. "You're welcome, by the way."

He didn't say thank you. Donnelly's never once said thank you to me in the entire time I've known him, and I've stopped expecting it, mostly because expecting it just makes the disappointment more punctual. But he did close his notebook, look at the two operatives with the particular satisfaction of a man about to do the one part of his job he's actually built for, and start reading them their rights in a voice that finally, for once this week, was aimed at exactly the right people.

CHAPTER 25

Dan's Final Screw-Up

Everything might have wrapped up cleanly right there, cuffs and confirmation and a very satisfying quiet settling over the conference room, if Dan hadn't chosen that exact moment to decide the situation needed one more contribution from him.

I still don't fully understand his reasoning, and when I asked him about it afterward, neither did he, which tracks. Somewhere in the chaos of Donnelly's backup arriving, more radios crackling, more badges flashing, Dan apparently decided this was his moment to "make a break for it and get help," despite the fact that help had, at that exact moment, already fully arrived and was standing directly in the doorway.

He bolted. Not away from danger — toward the hallway, past three responding officers, past Priya, past me shouting something that started with his name and ended with words I won't put on paper here, in the general shape of a man auditioning for a role in an action movie that had already wrapped principal photography twenty minutes earlier.

He made it four steps.

Beanie, still perched with total serenity on the conference table where his carrier door had apparently come loose sometime during the standoff, chose that precise moment to stretch a single leg directly into Dan's path, with the exact casual indifference of a cat who has never once in his life needed to try.

Dan went down. Hard, loud, a full-body event that knocked over a rolling whiteboard and sent a stack of printer paper — regular paper, thankfully, no encrypted hex this time — scattering across the carpet like confetti at the world's worst party.

The room went silent for a second. Then one of the responding officers, unable to help herself, let out a short laugh she immediately tried to disguise as a cough. Priya didn't even bother disguising hers.

I walked over, looked down at Dan sprawled across a floor now covered in loose paper, and offered him a hand up, because whatever else is true about Dan, he's mine to deal with, in the same resigned way you're stuck with weather or family.

"You tripped over the cat," I said. "Again."

"He does this on purpose."

"He doesn't have to try, Dan. That's the part you're not getting."

Dan took the hand, stood up, brushed himself off with what remained of his dignity, and looked genuinely, deeply offended on behalf of his own ankles. Beanie, from his spot on the table, offered no comment, no apology, and — I'd swear to this in court, if it ever came to that — the faintest possible look of satisfaction.

CHAPTER 26

The Arrest

By the time the room settled back into some semblance of order — whiteboard righted, paper gathered, Dan's dignity partially reassembled — Donnelly had the two BlackRiver operatives cuffed and seated, and a second team of officers was already headed up to the executive floor with a name and a warrant that had come together faster than I expected, mostly because Priya, once she understood exactly what she was looking at, had moved through OmniSphere's legal and compliance channels with the ruthless efficiency of someone who'd been quietly furious for four straight days and was finally allowed to do something about it.

Callahan didn't put up a fight when they found him. I heard about it secondhand — Priya's account, relayed later over coffee that finally tasted like something other than adrenaline — a man who'd built a very careful, very patient scheme over eighteen months, undone in the end not by some dramatic reveal but by a printer nobody had bothered replacing and a folder he should never have labeled the way he labeled it.

Dan, still nursing a bruised ego from his encounter with Beanie's outstretched leg, apparently felt this was the moment to reassert himself, loudly, to the nearest available officer.

"I'm a hacker, not a corporate guy!"

"You're barely either," I told him, not unkindly, because it was true and because after the week I'd had, I'd earned the right to say true things without softening them.

Donnelly walked past us on his way out, escorting the two BlackRiver operatives toward a cruiser waiting in the lot, and paused just long enough to look at me with something that wasn't quite respect but was standing somewhere in its neighborhood.

"This one's actually gonna hold up," he said. "Real evidence. Chain of custody and everything."

"You say that like it surprises you."

"It does, a little."

"Fair," I said, because it did surprise me too, a little, that a week that started with a Chromebook hinge had ended with an actual arrest, actual evidence, and an actual conference room full of people who owed their functioning company to a home repair guy, his chaotic associate, and a cat who'd contributed more competence to this case than either of us combined.

Donnelly didn't arrest me. I want that on the record, given the number of times over the years he's implied he might. For once, for exactly one case, his compass had found north and stayed there.

CHAPTER 27

The Rival Contractor Retreats

BlackRiver Risk Solutions, as a company, did not survive the week much better than Callahan did. I heard about it in pieces over the following days — Priya forwarding me a news alert here, Donnelly mentioning it offhand there — the firm's other contracts drying up fast once word got around that their operatives had been arrested mid-intimidation inside a client's own conference room, cuffed in front of witnesses, caught on badge-access logs they hadn't thought anyone would bother pulling.

Whoever was left running the firm from wherever BlackRiver's actual headquarters turned out to be apparently decided Worcester wasn't worth the continued exposure. The surveillance van outside my apartment was gone by that evening, and by the next morning, so was the one that had briefly, incorrectly, worried Mags outside her own house, though that one had never had anything to do with any of this in the first place.

I like to imagine them driving south on 290, toner still faintly dusting the shoulders of two very expensive blazers from an incident three chapters back that I know for a fact they were nowhere near, but the image amused me enough that I've decided to keep it anyway. A man's allowed a little embellishment after the week I'd had. I earned the toner joke, factually accurate or not.

What was accurate, and confirmed a few days later by Priya, was that BlackRiver's remaining leadership had scrubbed their public-facing website down to a single holding page within seventy-two hours, the digital equivalent of pulling the blinds and hoping the street forgets your address. Companies built entirely on staying quiet don't survive well once the quiet gets broken.

"They just left," Mags said, watching the last of it from her window with something between relief and disappointment, like a woman who'd finally gotten proof of the conspiracy she'd been chasing all week and immediately missed having something to chase.

"They just left," I confirmed. "That's usually how it goes, when the money runs out and the client's in custody. There's nothing left to protect."

Beanie, back on his usual windowsill, watched the empty street with his customary lack of visible reaction, which I'd come to understand by now wasn't indifference so much as a cat who'd already known how this was going to end three chapters before the rest of us caught up.

CHAPTER 28

Mags Thanks Hak

Mags showed up at my place two days later with what she clearly considered a properly weighted expression of gratitude — a folded twenty, a folded ten, and two folded fives, forty dollars total, plus a coupon for a brand of cat food Beanie has never once shown any interest in eating, clipped, she informed me proudly, from last Sunday's circular.

"For everything you did," she said, pressing it into my hand like it settled some cosmic ledger. "For me. For Beanie."

I looked at the coupon. It expired in nine days and covered exactly one dollar off a twelve-pack of a brand called Fancy Meadow, which sounded like a euphemism for something worse the longer I stared at it.

"Mags, I helped take down an insider trading scheme, a private security firm, and got a Worcester detective to arrest the right people for once in recorded history."

"I know! That's why I got the good coupon."

"I risked my life for a coupon," I said, mostly to the ceiling, mostly for my own benefit, because there was nobody else in the room who'd appreciate the specific tragicomedy of that sentence quite the way I needed it appreciated.

She beamed at me anyway, entirely unbothered, the way Mags beams at everything once she's decided a crisis has resolved to her satisfaction, and in fairness — genuine, if reluctant fairness — the forty dollars wasn't nothing, and the gesture underneath it wasn't nothing either. Mags doesn't have OmniSphere's budget. She's never going to hand me a consulting fee with three commas in it. What she's got is a coupon clipped with real intention and a cat she loves more than she loves most people, and both of those, in her own currency, were worth more than the paper they were printed on.

"Beanie says thank you too," she added, as if Beanie had ever once expressed gratitude for anything in his life.

Beanie, from the arm of my couch, looked at me with an expression I've come to recognize over the course of this whole ordeal as his signature contribution to any conversation — total indifference, wrapped in just enough ambiguity that you can't quite rule out competence underneath it.

"Sure he does," I said, and took the coupon anyway, because forty dollars and a discount on cat food I'd never buy was still, technically, more than OmniSphere's HR department had managed to process for me by that point in a check.

CHAPTER 29

Hak Cleans Up

It took most of a Saturday morning to get the toner fully out of the van's upholstery, a fine gray-black residue that had worked its way into the seams of the driver's seat sometime during the chaos of Chapter Nineteen and apparently decided to stay for the long haul. I'd tracked it in without noticing, same as I track most disasters in, quietly, on the bottom of a boot, until it's already everywhere and there's no single moment you can point to where you should've wiped your feet.

I worked through it with a shop vac, a bucket of gray water that kept refusing to run clear, and the specific silence of a man who'd had more than enough noise for one week and was, for once, grateful for the sound of nothing happening. No calls. No printers plotting anything. No vans parked with intent. Just me, a bucket, and a van that smelled faintly of toner and eucalyptus, which I've decided is now, permanently, the smell my brain associates with corporate crime, whether that's fair to eucalyptus or not.

The GPS tracker sat on my kitchen counter the whole time, a small black reminder of exactly how close this whole thing had gotten before it resolved. I turned it over in my hand once the van was clean, thought about keeping it as some kind of trophy, and decided against it. Trophies imply you'd want to remember the specifics. I mostly just wanted to remember the general shape of the lesson — that the boring calls aren't always boring, and the folders labeled DO NOT AUDIT are never, ever a coincidence.

"I'm too old for this," I said, for what felt like the fourth or fifth time that week, out loud, to an empty driveway, mostly because saying it had become less a complaint by that point and more a kind of ritual, the thing I say at the end of every job that reminds me I'm not actually as retired from this work as I keep insisting I am.

I wasn't, though. Too old for it. I'd proven that pretty definitively over the last seven days, whether I wanted the proof or not. What I was, more accurately, was tired in the specific way you get after a job that mattered, the good kind of tired,

the kind that comes with a check finally cleared from OmniSphere's actual HR department and a quiet certainty that whatever came next, it probably wouldn't involve a printer, a cat, or a wallet full of somebody else's crimes.

I should have known better than to think that. I always know better. I never act on it fast enough.

CHAPTER 30

Final Hook

The van was clean, the check had cleared, and I'd spent one entire evening — one, a personal record — not thinking about OmniSphere Technologies, Vance Callahan, or a cat with a suspiciously specific talent for load-bearing chaos. I'd allowed myself, for exactly that one evening, to believe the shape of my week had gone back to normal.

The phone rang at 8:52 the next morning, which should have told me everything I needed to know before I even answered it.

"Hi, is this the PC repair guy? My smart thermostat's been acting weird."

I sat there for a second, toolbag already half-packed out of pure reflex, and felt the specific, familiar dread of a sentence that sounds completely ordinary and is almost certainly lying to me about it.

"Define weird," I said, because I've learned, the hard way, more than once now, that "weird" is doing an enormous amount of unpaid overtime in that sentence, same as it always is.

"It just keeps changing the temperature on its own. Like, a lot. And sometimes at like three in the morning."

Somewhere in the back of my head, a very tired, very familiar voice — mine, obviously, who else's would it be — pointed out that a smart thermostat is, at the end of the day, just another small networked device nobody watches closely enough, sitting quietly on somebody's home network, doing things nobody asked it to do, on a schedule nobody set.

I told the woman on the phone I could be there in twenty minutes.

I got in the van — clean now, smelling like carpet cleaner instead of toner, the tracker sitting retired in a kitchen drawer where it would presumably stay until I found a better use for it or forgot about it entirely — and I pulled out onto the street

under a sky that had, once again, that flat gray look it gets when it can't decide whether to rain on me out of spite or general policy.

"I'm not even supposed to be here today," I said, to nobody, to the windshield, to the general unfairness of a universe that keeps routing its worst decisions through my caseload.

The van door stuck a little, same as always. I drove off toward whatever the thermostat actually was underneath, because in my experience by now, it's never just a thermostat.

Fade out.